The World Commission on Dams: then and now (FutureDAMS blog, published 16 November 2020)

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On 16 November 2000, the World Commission on Dams (WCD) launched its final report in London, in the presence of Nelson Mandela. This event marked the conclusion of an unlikely process. WCD was composed of 12 eminent personalities whose mandate was to review the global evidence base on dams and development and make recommendations for best practices in dam planning, construction, operation, and decommissioning. They were activists, engineers, academics, and government officials covering a diverse range of perspectives on dams and development.

Theirs was no simple task. The 1990s had seen tensions and conflicts around dams all around the world. The World Bank was a frequent target of campaigns against dams, whose reservoirs would submerge villages and flood indigenous territories, disrupt rural people's livelihoods, and irreversibly modify riverine ecosystems. In a number of cases, these protests led to a review of projects, and even the withdrawal of World Bank support, as for example in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Indian Narmada River.

In this context, uniting supporters and opponents of large dams to debate their differences in one commission seemed, at best, risky. Yet, Cape Town-based WCD did fulfil its mandate. Its report covered insights from an enormous number of studies conducted on its behalf, as well as from all kinds of stakeholders who had been consulted on all continents. WCD also made recommendations for best practice, which would mitigate negative social and environmental impacts and improve decision-making around large dams more broadly.

To mark WCD's 20th anniversary, we share here some insights from the FutureDAMS research with people who were part of WCD: former commissioners, staff, consultants, and observers of WCD. How do they remember WCD, and what impacts have they seen? Much has been said and written about WCD, but some lessons have become clearer over time.

WCD raised awareness for the social and environmental issues associated with large dams

Although many of the issues associated with the construction of large dams were well-known at the time of the WCD's work, they had not been appreciated equally by all stakeholder groups. Many of the WCD staff and associates interviewed for this research recalled how Jan Veltrop, who, as a former president of the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD) represented the engineering perspective inside WCD, was deeply moved by visiting impoverished communities of resettled people in Sri Lanka. Having spent his working life on building dams to improve people's lives, through the work of the WCD he had had the opportunity to see first-hand that people might in fact be worse off even many years after dam construction. This contributed to the WCD's position that many of the problems with dams could not be engineered away, but required political solutions and participation by dam-affected people in decision-making and planning.

Post-WCD, the social and environmental impacts of dams could no longer be treated as a marginal concern given undue prominence by the opponents of dams. Parts of the dam construction industry and their partners organised themselves to propose best practice guidelines in the form of a "Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol" (the latest edition was published in May 2020). Critics find flaws in these guidelines, and they have only been applied in a few projects thus far.

However, in a more optimistic reading they can be understood as a step in the right direction towards mitigating the negative side-effects of dam construction, and a response of a kind to the WCD's work.

WCD did and did not become the global standard for building dams

The name *World* Commission on Dams left no doubt about its aspirations. This was a commission that wanted to effect change around the globe. Yet few organisations have formally adopted its recommendations, with the prominent exception of the European Union, which requires an assessment against WCD criteria before supporting large hydropower projects within the framework of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Many participants in the WCD process had hoped that the World Bank would become the champion of WCD's recommendations, since they were involved in the impulse for its creation. The then president, James Wolfensohn, had sought to demonstrate more openness to working with civil society and other stakeholder groups, and WCD was a tangible outcome of this new openness.

Thus, many of those involved in the WCD's work were disappointed when the World Bank refused to endorse WCD's guidelines, and half-heartedly claimed to support its core values and strategic priorities. The disappointment took on a personal dimension, when the World Bank's senior water advisor, John Briscoe, travelled around the world to lobby developing countries' governments to reject the WCD report. Briscoe, a strong believer in the benefits of large dams, felt that process and outcome of the WCD report had been overly influenced by (non-governmental) anti-dam voices.

While some described his actions as the greatest obstacle towards making WCD a global standard for building dams, others claimed that this had never been the objective: instead, they had seen WCD as a provider of ideas and aspirations towards better dam decision-making, but certainly not as a producer of binding guidelines that could have been adopted by development banks as is. To date, no comparable exercise has been conducted, and the WCD retains its status as the leading reference for anyone wishing to make dam decision-making more equitable and sustainable.

WCD helped legitimise multi-stakeholder dialogue as a model for resolving conflict

By the late 1990s, global environmental commissions had gained a positive reputation, thanks to the Brundtland Commission, which had very successfully established the concept of sustainable development in the minds of policy-makers and publics internationally. In this sense, proposing WCD as a "Brundtland Commission for dams", seemed a sensible way forward to resolve the dilemmas and contradictions around dam construction.

Many of the interviewees cited the WCD process and format as its greatest legacy. It differed from other commissions in important ways: WCD was led by a politician from South Africa, Kader Asmal, and was the first major global commission to be based in a developing country of the Global South. For its time, it was remarkably diverse; commissioners were not just white elder statesmen from the Global North. Rather, they had years of experience of quite literally being in the field of dams; Joji Cariño, an indigenous representative from the Philippines had been defending indigenous people's rights in her country, first as a journalist and then as a campaigner against four Danish-funded dams; José Goldemberg had been in charge of dam construction as head of the electricity company of São Paulo, Brazil; Medha Patkar from India had been fighting against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam for years, sometimes attempting to drown herself in its rising reservoir; Ted Scudder had spent

decades with the Gwembe Tonga people of Zambia, studying the impacts of their displacement from traditional territories due to the construction of the Kariba Dam. The list goes on.

Bringing this diverse group of people to the table has sometimes been described as an "experiment in multi-stakeholder dialogue and global governance". At the beginning of this process, it seemed far from certain that this experiment would produce any tangible results. The Chinese Government, which had initially sent a representative to serve as Commissioner, walked out of the process early on; WCD was banned from holding its first stakeholder consultation meeting in India; there were great uncertainties about the budget of WCD throughout; and WCD often struggled with the politics of hearing the testimonies of dam-affected people in authoritarian countries. Yet, the idea that global governance should involve a diverse range of stakeholders, not just government representatives, became legitimised through WCD. Many interviewees spoke about taking this lesson forward in their personal careers since: invite everyone to the table, then discuss.

Despite its successes, a "World Commission on Dams 2.0" is unlikely

To a degree, WCD was a product of its time and historical context. Some of the factors that led to its creation and completion cannot be recreated in a second "experiment", to use the analogy introduced above. This begins with its origins. While in the 1990s, the World Bank was a primary target for anti-dam campaigns, in 2020, the funding landscape for dams is much more diverse. Countries such as China and India have become much more active developing dams at home and abroad, while World Bank funding has lost in importance. Private investment in large hydropower dams has also increased significantly. Who would have the convening power to propose a new World Commission on Dams today? Even if the World Bank were able to take this position, it is unlikely they would want to repeat this experience. The WCD experiment, rather than making dam building a sustainable and attractive investment option, initially increased the perception that investment in dams was risky. From a public relations perspective, WCD was not a positive experience for the World Bank either. In today's risk-averse yet polarised societies, would the World Bank invite their opponents such as the International Rivers Network to collaborate? This seems doubtful.

In contrast with today, the 1990s were a period of political progress and optimism for the future. Communist dictatorships had ended, before transforming into oligarchic autocracies, the "global war on terror" was not yet on the agenda, and South Africa had successfully transitioned from its pariah status under the apartheid regime to a hopeful democracy. The latter factor is particularly relevant to WCD, considering that it was based in Cape Town, and chaired by an acting Minister of the South African government. His credentials as a long-term anti-apartheid activist who had lived in exile in Ireland, working as a professor for human rights at Trinity College Dublin, did give WCD some moral authority. Although some interviewees recalled being assaulted and there were issues with street crime, the majority described their stay in South Africa as one of the most exciting times in their lives, where working to resolve one of the toughest issues in development seemed a realistic possibility. The challenge paled in comparison with the achievement of ending one of the world's most repressive regimes.

The personal dimension of research and global governance

"In too many cases an unacceptable and often unnecessary price has been paid to secure [the] benefits [of large dams], especially in social and environmental terms, by people displaced, by

communities downstream, by taxpayers and by the natural environment." This statement from the Executive Summary of WCD's final report was cited by many respondents as one of the main messages they recalled twenty years after. It was the result of in-depth negotiations inside WCD, and illustrates how pro- and anti-dam commissioners reconciled their differences. Supporters of dams did not disagree that dams had had negative impacts, the evidence was clear, and this statement allowed for a positive approach that seeks to mitigate them.

Yet, the statement does not reveal the human dimension, the intense discussions that led to its formulation. It is one of many statements in a report of 300+ pages, even if it appears quite early on. These discussions between opposing sides of the dams debate were possible, because WCD gave the space for commissioners to get to know each other as people. Many respondents commented on the importance of time spent together in between official meetings, even if it was just for a coffee or dinner. WCD's field trips to individual large dams around the world were also important spaces that helped generate good interpersonal relationships that allowed for respectful dialogue about differences in opinion, and created the determination to produce a result against all odds.

Another important human element in WCD were the often emotional testimonials by dam-affected people. Several respondents recalled a moving speech given by Carlos Chen, an indigenous survivor of the Chixoy dam massacre that had taken place in Guatemala, where his wife, children, and 400 members of his community were murdered to make way for a World Bank-funded dam. Even the strongest supporters of dams could not remain indifferent to such stories of criminal injustice. WCD's apparent scepticism about large dams may in part be the result of these human stories. Although much space was given to governments and business representatives to discuss the benefits of large dams at public hearings as well, their speeches on MW and national targets for hydropower production could not move audiences in the same way.